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SENSITIVE
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TAGS: [SENV](#) [TBIO](#) [TSPL](#) [MO](#) [XI](#) [XF](#)
SUBJECT: U.S.-MOROCCO LABORATORY BIOSAFETY AND BIOSECURITY
WORKSHOP

REF: RABAT 755

11. (U) Summary: The first joint U.S.-Morocco Workshop on Laboratory Biosafety and Biosecurity took place November 3-5 in Rabat, bringing together U.S. and international experts with policy makers, administrators and scientists from several Moroccan ministries and laboratories. The U.S. delegation also met separately with Government of Morocco (GOM) officials, and toured laboratories during the week. Many GOM officials expressed a strong interest in continuing collaboration with the U.S. to improve the safety and security of Moroccan labs, increase Morocco's standing in the region as a leader in biosafety and biosecurity practices, and more broadly increase science and technology (S&T) linkages with the U.S. End Summary.

LABORATORY BIOSAFETY AND BIOSECURITY WORKSHOP

12. (U) The U.S. Department of State's Bio-engagement Program (BEP), within the Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation's Office of Cooperative Threat Reduction (ISN/CTR), led a U.S. delegation to co-organize a Biosafety and Biosecurity workshop with the Moroccan Ministry of Health's (MOH) National Institute of Hygiene (INH). This initiative responded to a prior Moroccan request for general awareness-raising training for national stakeholders in biosafety and biosecurity. The first two days of the workshop highlighted the importance and benefits of laboratory biosafety and biosecurity, and improved national legislation, to national security, human and animal health, and the economy. The INH saw this as an opportunity to bring together the relevant stakeholders for an awareness-raising event in advance of an expected MOH proposal to create a national interagency committee on biosafety and biosecurity. The last day of the workshop was technical in nature, again at the request of the INH; this day provided training and certification in the proper, internationally-accepted procedures for the shipment of hazardous biological samples

as laid out by the International Air Transport Association (IATA) *- a self-identified knowledge gap in Moroccan laboratories.

¶3. (U) U.S. experts from Sandia National Laboratories and the Navy Medical Research Unit No. 3 (NAMRU-3), based in Cairo, Egypt, conducted the bulk of the workshop training. In addition, two experts on international nonproliferation legislation from the Verification Research, Training and Information Centre (VERTIC) presented their work with foreign governments to assess and improve biological weapons nonproliferation legislation worldwide. A number of Moroccan government officials from the INH, the MOH's Directorate of Epidemiology, and the state-owned veterinary and agricultural laboratory Biopharma also gave presentations outlining the status of human and animal health and lab infrastructure in Morocco, as well as GOM initiatives to meet the requirements set forth by the World Health Organization's International Health Regulations.

¶4. (U) Moroccan participants were enthusiastic about the workshop; close to 80 participants from several ministries and bioscience institutes attended the first two days, and more than twice as many people as invited asked to attend the hazardous shipping component on the last day. By the end of the workshop, over 45 scientists passed the IATA certification exam for the shipment of hazardous substances. Furthermore, the INH pledged to continue domestic efforts to strengthen biosafety and biosecurity regimes by assembling a multi-agency committee that would address national biosafety and biosecurity plans and programs.

SAFETY, SECURITY, AND S&T COOPERATION

¶5. (SBU) The U.S. delegation met with a number of Moroccan policy makers, laboratory administrators and scientists to discuss ways to collaborate more closely on laboratory biosafety and biosecurity, disease surveillance and control, and the development of better national legislation and regulations to help meet the obligations of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) and United Nations Security Council Resolution 1540. INH Director Rajae El Aouad expressed an interest in collaborating with the U.S. to improve the level of safety and security within the large network of regional and provincial labs under INH oversight, as well as to build capacity to detect specific diseases. El Aouad believes that partnering with the U.S. would be politically useful for securing future support from the Ministry of Health by showing that the INH has access to needed technical support. The U.S. delegation also met with Dr. Mohammed Benboudia from the Direction of Technology, Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. Benboudia, the Moroccan coordinator for initiatives under the U.S.- Morocco Science and Technology (S&T) Agreement signed in November 2006, expressed his wish that life sciences be accorded a higher priority for bilateral cooperation under the agreement, and agreed to communicate further with the Embassy on potential avenues for cooperation.

¶6. (SBU) On the margins of the workshop, VERTIC met with officials from the Moroccan Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Health, and Higher Education interested in the drafting of nonproliferation legislation. VERTIC representatives catalyzed a discussion on the ways they could help the GOM evaluate and improve the current national legislation meant to prevent and criminalize the proliferation and use of biological weapons. VERTIC then reviewed the current Moroccan legislation with the Moroccan interlocutors. VERTIC's participation in the conference and side discussions led to an increased level of communication between the various Moroccan agencies on biosafety and biosecurity; helped the GOM begin to outline the roles and responsibilities of the various agencies; and produced a commitment to continue the dialogue. ISN/CTR offered to provide support for future VERTIC work in Morocco and the

surrounding region.

LABORATORY TOURS

¶7. (U) The U.S. delegation toured several laboratories in Rabat and Casablanca under INH auspices in order to assess laboratory capacity, safety and security, and discuss possible opportunities for future collaboration. The tours focused on institutes that investigate infectious diseases, especially those facilities with Biosafety Level 3 (BSL-3) high containment laboratories. Facilities visited included the National Institute of Hygiene, the Military Health Laboratory, the Gendarmerie Laboratory, the Pasteur Institute, and the Casablanca regional health laboratory. A visit to the Biopharma laboratory, one of Morocco's leading animal health and agriculture facilities, was canceled due to serious ongoing outbreaks of "peste des petits ruminants" (sheep plague) in Morocco. Biopharma had implemented a strict no-visitors policy during its crash effort to produce 25 millions doses of vaccine within a two week period.

¶8. (U) The U.S. team was welcomed at each institute, given access to the primary infectious disease and high containment

labs on each campus, and in general had frank discussions about the status and needs of Moroccan laboratories. Without exception, the staff of each institute expressed a desire to collaborate in the future. In addition, the lab tours helped to forge connections between Moroccan institutes *- for example, the trip to the Military Health Lab was the first time the INH personnel had visited the military campus; military and INH staff had a brief discussion on possible ways they could work together on improving safety in their laboratories. Finally, while the U.S. delegation was not able to visit the Biopharma laboratories, the delegation met with Dr. Mehdi El Harrak, director of the institute, to discuss animal health needs in Morocco, and potential ways to collaborate in the future. El Harrak invited ISN/CTR to visit his facility on a future trip.

OPEN TO FUTURE COOPERATION

¶9. (SBU) ISN/CTR and INH personnel discussed several possible next steps to deepen collaboration on laboratory biosafety and biosecurity in Morocco. The U.S. delegation will draft and share a general assessment of the biosafety and biosecurity in the INH laboratories, along with recommendations for possible assistance. INH, in turn, will draft a list of its institutional priorities in biosafety and biosecurity. An initial area of focus will be in identifying and training biosafety officers within the INH and the 16 regional public health labs for which it has oversight responsibilities.

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